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**Revitalization of Female History:  
An Analysis of Adrienne Rich's Diving into the Wreck  
and The Dream of a Common Language**

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**Abstract**

Of the many important female American poets of the twentieth century, Adrienne Rich is one of the most significant. In her many journals and essays, Rich exposes an ongoing journey of self-discovery, a journey also revealed in her poetry. Her books of poetry *Diving into the Wreck* and *The Dream of a Common Language* in particular display a progression of thought about womanhood. This progression begins with a desire for androgyny achieved through a revival of the feminine portion of history in *Diving into the Wreck*. To achieve androgyny would mean an achievement of balance between male and female, which would mean the notion of male supremacy could be successfully discarded. Rich abandons this androgynous approach, however, and moves forward to express a need for and attempt at a rewritten history of women in *The Dream of a Common Language*. An advocate for the Women's Liberation Movement and radical feminism, Rich's work reflects her philosophical and political leanings that stem from the 1970s. This is a comparative study that draws not only from the writings of Rich herself but also from contemporary scholarship and literary critics.

Keywords: Poetry, Adrienne Rich, Female history

## **1. A Brief Overview of the Poet**

Of the many important female American poets of the twentieth century, Adrienne Rich is one of the most significant. In her many journals and essays, Rich exposes an ongoing journey of self-discovery, a journey also revealed in her poetry. Her books of poetry *Diving into the Wreck* and *The Dream of a Common Language* in particular display a progression of thought about womanhood. By observing her life and poetry, the work of this riveting poet reveals aspects of the incomplete history of women.

Adrienne Rich grew up in an environment that while educationally beneficial, was also stifling. Her father greatly encouraged her to read and write poetry and also taught her the essentials of form and meter (Sickels 9). This early education in poetry provided a solid foundation for Rich's later career. Despite her early poetic prowess however, Rich's extensive knowledge can in no way be attributed to the resources found in her own home. The literary environment was limited, as her father's library consisted solely of white male authors (17). When Rich came of age, she took the opportunity to leave home and attend Radcliffe College where she ardently expanded her literary horizons by becoming an avid reader of an expanded canon beyond what was available in her father's library (21). Upon graduation, Rich took a tour of Europe on a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1952 (Moore 294). Very soon after returning home married Alfred Conrad in 1953 in an attempt to leave her parents' household (Sickels 26). Rich's attempts to gain freedom through leaving her parents were thwarted as she simply moved from one stifling atmosphere to another: from her parents' household to her marriage.

Rich's new atmosphere included not only the label 'wife,' but also the label 'mother.' Rich gave birth to three sons in a span of only five years (Moore 294). Rich quickly began to feel anger and frustration at being bound by the confines of motherhood with no other options available to her (Peck 929). In a journal entry, Rich writes "My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience. It is the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness" (*Of Woman Born* 21). Rich, unable to live up to the cultural expectations of motherhood, was often "haunted by the stereotype of the mother whose love is 'unconditional' and by the visual and literary images of motherhood as a single-minded identity," in which women focused solely on their house and children and on nothing else (*Of Woman Born* 23). Women were expected to dedicate their lives to both their husband and children, and Rich found that she had difficulty giving herself over fully to her duties. After determining that her life in the roles of wife and mother were too creatively restrictive and thorough dissatisfaction with the



traditional state of marriage and womanhood, Adrienne Rich formally separated from her husband in 1970, and immersed herself in the Women's Liberation Movement (Sickels 59). Her husband committed suicide the year following their separation (Moore 295). Identifying as a feminist and with feminists, Rich's writings and political actions called for a radical feminism (295). It was during this time that some of her best poetry was produced as she concerned herself with concepts of tradition and the history of women.

## **2. The Poetry: Diving into the Wreck (1973) and The Dream of a Common Language (1978)**

In her books *Diving into the Wreck* and *The Dream of a Common Language*, Adrienne Rich exhibits a transformative understanding beginning with a desire for a revitalization of female history, accompanied by conceptions of androgyny, but eventually moving towards a need for a rewritten history of women.

In order to analyze Rich's *Diving into the Wreck* however, the term and concept of 'androgyny' must first be defined. Psychiatrist Carl Jung presented material that considered androgyny an ideal state of existence. His ideology of androgyny consists of a "search for a point of balance that unites the opposites, stabilizes the personality, and brings the sense of wholeness" (Bazin and Freeman 193). It is only once this wholeness is achieved can one truly know and understand life in a pure form. Balance and wholeness indicate a harmonious incorporation of both male and female traits. The oppositions of the male and female are exactly what androgyny attempts to dismantle. In order to fully embrace androgyny, one must overcome the way the masculine and feminine oppose each other and "perceive the underlying unity of the two" (191). This wholeness will not only exhibit balance, but will also incorporate a complete abandonment of utter self focus which tends to further separatist ideologies (194). A person focused solely on the self can only exhibit one set of gender traits. For instance, a woman focused wholly inwardly on herself will only notice and magnify the feminine traits. Likewise, a man focused wholly inwardly on himself will only notice and magnify the masculine traits. This focus nullifies any chance of harmony, balance, and ultimately, androgyny.

The patriarchal society of the twentieth century in which Rich was working and writing hindered the achievement of androgyny because of the elevation of the masculine viewpoint above the feminine. Bazin and Freeman note that society was one where "the Feminine [was], for the most part, suppressed," therefore rendering androgyny virtually unobtainable (196). Under the rule of patriarchy, feminine traits are quelled, and the suppression of the feminine hinders the quest for balance (197). Society can only realize androgyny once patriarchy is disbanded and women

are able to take an equal place.

Traditionally, a striving to achieve androgyny was only conceived of in one way: the masculine incorporating the feminine to achieve balance. A woman was expected to remain “wholly feminine” under patriarchal stipulations (Stimpson 243). This “patriarchal bias” on the ideology of androgyny eliminated its validity as an achievement of wholeness (243). As Cynthia Secor states “Androgyny, as the term is used in our patriarchal culture, conjures up images of the feminized male” (166). This expectation eliminates the possibility of the feminine incorporating the masculine, thereby disempowering women. Adrienne Rich takes this cultural androgynous tradition and explores an alternate route.

Rich begins her quest for androgyny by expressing a need for it, evident in the poem “Trying to Talk to a Man”. This poem explicates a man’s power over and insensitivity towards, a woman—a relationship hostile to an androgynous state. William Jeffs explains that “the man communicates with only a will to dominate,” a fact which disempowers the woman and makes her feel helpless (115). The man’s insensitivity is shown through a continual pattern of dominating behaviour. First, the man shows dominance by unquestioningly taking charge of the foray, he being the one who “mention[s] the danger / and list[s] the equipment” before they begin their journey into the desert (Rich, “Trying to Talk to a Man”, ll. 28-29). The woman is not the one to mention the danger, nor is she given a chance to have a voice. Instead, together they “talk of people caring for each other” (l. 30). The woman does not have the same status as the man, whose “eyes are stars of a different magnitude,” and whose “dry heat feels like power”; a specific masculine power exudes from his being (l. 33-34). The image portrays a powerful man unwilling to budge from his position of dominance, which creates a need for the woman to change her position from one of subservience to one of power. If the position of the woman never changes, she will stay in subservience. In the poem “Diving into the Wreck,” Rich achieves this position of power as she achieves the androgynous ideal.

Adrienne Rich specifically challenges the traditional view of androgyny and how it relates to women in her poem “Diving into the Wreck” by expressing a need for a revitalization of female history by examining its lack of presence. Before diving into the sea to explore the wreck of history, Rich notes in the poem that she “read the book of myths” (“Diving into the Wreck” l. 1). This journey is a journey for truth, to combat those myths read in the beginning. In order to proceed on the journey, the false history must be known and understood as preparation for revitalization. Rich searches the wreck for truth:

I came to see the damage that was done  
and the treasures that prevail.

I stroke the beam of my lamp  
slowly along the flank  
of something more permanent  
than fish or weed

the thing I came for:  
the wreck and not the story of the wreck  
the thing itself and not the myth.  
("Diving into the Wreck" ll. 55-63)

The history of women sustained damage; Rich explores the wreck of female history to see the extent of that damage and to see if any treasures prevailed. Another purpose in the exploration of the wreck is to uncover truth, to upset the myth and see "the wreck [...] itself" as opposed to "the story of the wreck" ("Diving into the Wreck" l. 62-63). History has been rewritten and the wreck of female history has been transformed into merely a story; by diving Rich uncovers the real wreck noting "the evidence of damage" done to female history (l. 66). It is after seeing the truth of the transformation of female history into a merely a story that Rich is able to incorporate the androgynous ideal, breaking the tradition of the feminine into the masculine and embodying the transfer of masculine to feminine:

And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair  
streams black, the merman in his armored body  
We circle silently  
about the wreck  
we dive into the hold.  
I am she: I am he  
(ll. 72-77)

In exposing the damage, seeing the truth of the wreck, and seeking out prevailing treasures, Rich discovers a female history. By exposing the damage, Rich brings to light the atrocities exacted upon female history—namely its lack of existence. In seeing and acknowledging the truth of the wreck of history, Rich provides a starting point for a revitalization of female history. Seeking out prevailing treasures allows Rich to find the remnants of anything that might be left of female history. In her discovery, she is able to achieve a harmonious androgynous state, proving that resurrecting the history that was lost would bring balance. In revitalizing the feminine, true balance with the masculine becomes possible.

After achieving androgyny through the revitalization of a female history in *Diving into the Wreck*, in her later work Rich abandons androgyny because it is accompanied by the expectation of heterosexual relationships and a need for

some type of masculinity. The expectation of heterosexual relationships stems from a striving to achieve balance between both the masculine and the feminine. In a heterosexual relationship where one man and one woman are expected to be together, that brings balance between masculine and feminine and supports the androgynous ideal. In a homosexual relationship, where two women or two men come together, that relationship achieves no such balance. Secor points out that "traditional connotations of 'androgyny' keep us focused very firmly on heterosexual pairing both as norm and ideal" (167). By having one partner from each sex represented, 'wholeness' and 'balance' as defined by Jung become tangible; this leaves no room for alternate relationships, especially homosexual ones. Rich abandons this idea of androgyny because it supports a specific need for the masculine; she considered the expectation of heterosexual relationships to be a construct of patriarchy. Strongly promoting homosexual relationships, Rich explains that "women have been convinced that marriage and sexual orientation toward men are inevitable [...] components of their lives" (*Of Woman Born* 39). Rich continues on to say that "lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also a direct or indirect attack on male right of access to women" (*Of Woman Born* 52). According to Rich, any construct of patriarchy must be abandoned if women are to be able to unite together freely, including heterosexuality.

Not only are relationships historically dominated by patriarchy, but language as well. In the past, men were the ones who were able to read and write new material, and women were kept on the edges of society. Male writers, then, dominate the presses and "thus become the purveyors of history and of specific images of masculine and feminine behavior" (Jeffs 121). Rich's writing process for *The Dream of a Common Language* derives from the fact of male-dominated and male-determined language in which she "composes poems based on experience that exclude men, delineating a world in which men play no part" (Jeffs 122). Jeffs goes on to say that "By separating language and therefore poetry from the masculine paradigm, Rich envisions a new kind of feminist vision in which men play no part" (Jeffs 122). Thus Rich unearths a dire need for a re-written history of women, a history that does not present a drastic male bias, and explores homosexuality more fully so as to completely abandon all traces of patriarchy.

Adrienne Rich explores the history of women in a new way in *The Dream of a Common Language*. In the poem "Power," she exalts Marie Curie, a woman who transcended traditional constructs and was accomplished in a traditionally male sphere. Curie penetrated the male-dominated field of science and made a truly legitimate discovery that demanded respect from her male colleagues.

However, making that discovery was laborious; Rich points out that “her body [was] bombarded for years by the element / she had purified” (“Power” ll. 8-9). Curie achieved power by discovering an element now included in the periodic table. But the element harmed her physically however, she was continuously “denying / her wounds / denying / her wounds came from the same source as her power” (ll. 14-17). The focus is placed not on the physical damage, but rather on the power (as the title suggests) that Marie Curie gained from her research. Adrienne Rich rewrites history by eliminating the traditional passive role of women and by recording the stories of accomplished women.

Rich explores another aspect of women traditionally ignored: strength. In “Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev,” Rich speaks to the strength of a community of women as they embark on an untraditional endeavor. Shatayev led a women’s climbing team up Lenin Peak, as explained by Rich in a short excerpt provided before the poem. The entire team died from exposure during a snowstorm and later, Shatayev’s husband climbed the mountain to locate their bodies and provide them with a proper burial. The women’s strength is first shown through the establishment of a community of women. The speaker of the poem transforms from being a singular woman a part of the excursion to being the spokesperson for the entire group of women that embarked on the expedition. The speaker of the poem says “If in this sleep I speak / it’s with a voice no longer personal / (I want to say with voices),” and then continues the rest of the poem using the plural “we” (“Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev” ll. 4-6). By employing the plural, the speaker takes the emphasis away from herself as a singular woman; every time the word “we” is used the entire group of climbers is indicated meaning that no one woman is constituted as more important than the others. The significance of this community of women is also established towards the end of the poem as it mentions the “danger” of their “separateness”:

We know now we have always been in danger  
down in our separateness  
and now up here together           but till now  
we had not touched our strength  
(ll. 63-66)

In their separateness, the women were in danger, yet once together touch their strength. The strength of the women derives from the community and togetherness; only once they were together could they tap into the underlying strength.

The strength of the women also comes from their willingness to undertake their climbing expedition. The poem describes that “For months for years each

one of us / had felt her own yes growing in her" (9-10). Rich describes the yes as "slowly forming" while the women engaged in preparatory acts such as "mending rucksack[s]" (ll. 11, 12). The women's strength is also shown through their purpose for climbing. While Shatayev's husband climbed the mountain to find the bodies, climbing for "himself," the women climbed to find their strength. The purpose of their climb breaks from traditional gender roles as they sought self-gratification and strength through their community of women. In this poem, Adrienne Rich continues to write the names of women into the book of myths, legitimizing women's place in history.

In the first section of *The Dream of a Common Language*, Rich shows the strength and power of particular women as she rewrites history. In the following two sections, however, Rich expands her ideas and presents the importance of a rewritten history of women as well as a picture of lesbianism. The last poem in the collection, "Transcendental Etude" incorporates both of these ideas. Female history was left untouched because women were not made aware of how they should go about learning of it. Rich says that "No one ever told us we had to study our lives, / make of our lives a study, as if learning natural history / or music" ("Transcendental Etude" ll. 43-45). The title "Transcendental Etude" even brings this concept of study to mind. As an etude is a piece of music intended for the study or practice to attain a particular technique, so must history be studied in order for it to maintain its status. Rich describes this essential process, beginning:

with the simple exercises first  
and slowly go on trying  
the hard ones, practicing till strength  
and accuracy become one with the daring  
to leap into transcendence  
("Transcendental Etude" 46-50)

The precedence the study of history should take becomes even more urgent as the poem unfolds, stating "But there come times—perhaps this is one of them— / when we have to take ourselves more seriously or die" ("Transcendental Etude" ll.92-93). If history is neither carried on nor preserved, then the history of women will completely die out. Rich maintains hope, however, because even though "we were always like this," "knowing it makes the difference" ("Transcendental Etude" ll. 112-113). A study of history and a new understanding has revealed that being born a woman has "stripped our birthright from us," and has "tor[n] us [...] from ourselves" ("Transcendental Etude" 114-115). With this newly acquired understanding, a healing process in the history and community of women may begin. Not only are women equipped to start recording their own history,



but women are also equipped to begin renewing all forms of woman to woman relationships destroyed by patriarchy.

The patriarchal prejudice against lesbian relationships makes itself very clear in this collection of poems. In "Transcendental Etude" Rich notes that women were told "Only: that it is unnatural, / the homesickness for a woman, for ourselves" ("Transcendental Etude" ll. 121-122). The homesickness may refer to the longing for a revived female community. Women, previously separated from one another by a broken history, were unable to achieve fully consonant relationships. Once history is revitalized and rewritten, women can rediscover and renew relationships among each other. Those renewed relationships produce a dynamic that is able to transcend patriarchy. Rich expresses this idea as she describes women beginning a new tradition: "two women, eye to eye / measuring each other's spirit, each other's limitless desire, / a whole new poetry beginning here" ("Transcendental Etude" 144-147). This newfound type of relationship between women is only possible through this new sense of history. Women can know women better because there is now a common sense of grounding. Rich explore this new relationship between women more thoroughly in the second section of *The Dream of a Common Language*.

In the collection of *Twenty-One Love Poems*, Adrienne Rich illustrates both a deep psychological connection and a physical connection between women. In poem XI, Rich expresses a desire for deep companionship and a wish to be close to the external being. She says "I want to travel with you / to every sacred mountain" (ll. 5-6). History has been cruel to homosexual relationships such as the one described, and so "weeks have to do time for years of missing each other" ("III" l. 1). There is also a desire to be close enough "to feel your arteries glowing in my clasp" ("XI" l. 8). This expresses a longing for a closer, more intimate connection between the women, as they make up for time lost. This same desire to make up time is expressed in a very physical manner in "(The Floating Poem, Unnumbered)." The explicit physical woman to woman sexual contact is unmistakable. The explicit content aside, however, Rich bemoans the time gone by, saying "where I had been waiting years for you," indicating the time lost while female history was in the process of rediscovery ("Floating Poem Unnumbered" l. 8)

Following the deep physical connection there is an expression of a deeper psychological connection. Poem XVI describes a lover being able to connect, even from far away. The first line of the poem: "Across a city from you, I'm with you" ("XVI" l. 1). Their connection is deep enough that the lover can sense the presence of the other even when separated: "I can hear your breath tonight, I know how your face / lies upturned" ("XVI" ll. 12-13). This type of intimate female connection would not have been possible had not history been rediscovered and restored.

### 3. Conclusion

Through Adrienne Rich's poetry it is easy to trace a progression from a resurrection of female history achieved through a reverse concept of androgyny (feminine incorporation of masculine traits) to a completely different approach through a revitalized history of women. By changing language to reflect a history of women, Rich not only showed a vision of a renewed language common to all that would break away from patriarchal stipulations but also strove to rewrite history to include a feminine historical narrative. Rich succeeded in her rewritten history of women by writing specific names and empowering acts (such as Marie Curie and Elvira Shatayev's climb) into what she terms in the poem "Diving into the Wreck" as "the book of myths" (22).

Rich's rewritten history of women not only allowed for the book of myths to be put to rights to include women in history, but also opened avenues for renewed relationships between women. Previously, relationships of any kind were clouded and dictated by patriarchal society. With Rich's new 'common language,' women can finally relate to one another in terms not dictated by men. This new language opens up many avenues in which women may relate to one another.

Adrienne Rich's journey from androgyny to strong support of lesbian relationships opens the door for a different approach to not only homosexuality but also to language. Her desire to renew the broken, patriarchal language and introduce a language common to all, while not completely fulfilled as of yet, may prove a useful way of viewing culture. Observing where society has allowed women to fall out of place is the only way to reconstruct culture and create a more balanced and complete world. Rich's poetry proves not only stylistically astounding but also cognitively challenging.



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